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# **Critical theory in crisis? A reconsideration**

***Beate Jahn***

## **Abstract**

The recent rise of populism has generated a resurgence of interest in critical theory, in the wider public debate and in academia – with critical theory being variously accused of paving the way for post-truth politics, hailed as explaining the rise of populism, or criticized for failing to achieve its emancipatory political goals. Failure of the latter kind, many International Relations (IR) scholars argue, calls for a fundamental reform of critical theory if it is to address current political developments. Investigating this claim, this article makes three contributions: First, an empirical account shows that, far from failing, critical theory has been politically highly successful. Second, it makes sense of the alienation of critical theorists by tracing the changing conception of critical theory from its origins to the current debate. Third, recovering the historical context shows that the current predicament of critical theory has its roots not in its detachment from, but in its entanglement with, neoliberal practices and political dynamics. If critical theory is to regain its critical edge, therefore, it has to resist closer alignment with these forces. Instead of abandoning core critical principles, its task in times of Brexit and Trump lies in systematically applying these principles to the current historical conjuncture.

## **Introduction**

The Brexit referendum, the election of Trump and the rise of populism more generally present a particular challenge for critical theory. For critical theory had originally been formulated as a response to populism – fascism and national socialism – in the 1920s and 1930s (Horkheimer 1968; Morton 2003). More specifically, critical theories have variously been devoted to the fight against nationalism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-intellectualism, economic inequality and power politics. Yet precisely these phenomena appear to experience a powerful revival today. No wonder, therefore, that critical theorists, in line with a wider public debate, ask themselves what their role in these developments has been and what resources critical theory offers in response.

Yet there is little agreement on the historical role of critical theory or its current potential. For many IR scholars the rise of populist political movements dramatizes longer standing concerns about the failure of critical theories to achieve their emancipatory political goals (Kurki 2011: 129; see also Murphy 2007:118; Andrews 2013: 67, 72; Austin et al 2019: 4; Michelsen 2018). Others, in line with a broader public debate, go so far as to accuse critical theories - 'relativism, constructivism, deconstruction, postmodernism, critique' (Edsall 2018; Wight 2018; McIntyre 2018; Kakutani 2018; Sismondo 2017) – of paving the way for Trump's post-truth politics: 'Trump is the first president to turn postmodernism against itself' (David Ernst cited in Hanlon 2018). And critical theorists themselves worry that their work may in fact have been complicit in creating a 'slippery slope' leading to 'the Trump administration's "alternative facts"' (Whooley 2017; Hyvönen 2018; Marshall and Drieschova 2018). And yet, critical theory is also hailed as having anticipated the rise of Trump (Ross 2016) and of offering particularly useful concepts - such as 'the culture industry' or 'the authoritarian personality' - for the analysis of this development: 'If you want to understand the age of Trump, read the Frankfurt School' (Illing 2016; Ross 2016; Guyer 2020).

Even in IR where the disappointment of many, if by no means all, critical theorists with their own approach finds expression in fora and special issues (*Security Dialogue* 2019; *International Politics Review* 2021), explanations for its shortcomings as well as suggested solutions differ widely. Some scholars argue that critical theories failed to achieve their emancipatory aims because they focused too much

on metatheoretical and theoretical work, neglecting engagement with concrete political problems and failing to undertake empirical studies that could provide convincing alternative accounts of world politics (Brown 2013: 490; Sylvester 2013: 615; Hamati-Ataya 2013; Browning and McDonald 2011: 235; Schmid 2017: 1; Anievas 2005). This argument implies that critical theory can enhance its political efficiency if it overturns this relationship: if it engages in 'critical problem solving' (Post-Critical IR? 2018), focusing on the empirical analysis of pressing political problems instead of engaging in metatheoretical reflections.

A second position holds that the widening gap between critical theory and contemporary politics has its roots in (various) uncritical aspects of the original conception of critical theory itself. For example, the assumption of the death of God as the starting point for the dialectics of the Enlightenment in general, and the limitations of modern knowledge in particular, universalizes the Western historical experience and conceptions of knowledge (Hirst and Michelsen 2013: 109). It thus cannot grasp different forms of knowledge and their political implications arising, for example, in the postcolonial context - which may therefore provide a more promising basis for radical political agency (Hamati-Ataya 2013). Similarly, feminists argue that critical theory failed to identify the gendered nature of its own basic categories (Fischer and Tepe 2011: 369). The original conception of critical theory also entailed the tendency to think in statist terms that have been overtaken by the development of globalization and cosmopolitanism (Brincat 2011: 227f). These writers, in sum, argue that critical theory is out of sync with history - backward - and hence requires updating in order to become relevant for contemporary political problems.

A third position turns this argument on its head. Here, it is not the original conception of critical theory that entails uncritical elements but rather its subsequent development. Habermasian approaches, for example, are accused of overlooking the early Frankfurt School approach to subject-object relations with the result of reproducing abstract norms and structures (Fluck 2014: 57; Azmanova 2020). Similarly, Foucaultian and Latourian approaches are held responsible for shifting the focus onto the concrete and particular - thus neglecting totality as a crucial dimension of critical thought. The solution to this problem then lies in the return to an original formulation of critical theory - for example that of Marx (Koddenbrock 2015:

245, 257). Thus, critical theory is accused of a kind of 'runaway' development that left some of its original and still valid core assumptions behind - and it can reestablish its political relevance by recovering an authoritative strand of critical theory.

At a minimum, these diverse and even contradictory remedies - updating core concepts, identifying authoritative versions, or focusing on empirical analyses (Wight 2018; Post-Critical IR? 2018; Austin et al 2019: 15) – call for clarification. But they also raise a more fundamental problem: these analyses claim that critical theory has failed either because it is out of sync with history (backward or forward) or because it is out of touch with practice. Yet this claim directly contradicts two of critical theory's core assumptions: namely that *all* knowledge is historical and that theory *is* practice – suggesting that different notions of critical theory inform this debate.

This article therefore seeks to advance the debate by providing a ground clearing exercise, in three steps. I will first investigate the empirical claims that critical theory has been out of touch with practice and out of sync with history. This analysis shows, contra widespread assumptions, that critical theories have not only been closely aligned with historical developments but also politically quite successful – in the sense of shaping a wide range of actors, debates, policies and institutions. This raises the question: why, in light of these historical achievements, are so many critical theorists dissatisfied with their approach?

I will explore this question in a second step by tracing the conception of critical theory – from Max Horkheimer's original formulation through the beginnings of critical IR theory to the current debate. This reveals that critical theory operates simultaneously at both the metatheoretical and the empirical level – and while it has been successful in the latter register, it has lost sight of its core metatheoretical principles. Much of critical theory has become part of the establishment. Moreover, while this process of integration constitutes an inevitable part of the mutually constitutive nature of knowledge and reality, the last step of the argument shows that the current debate reflects the specific pressures and requirements of neoliberalism.

This analysis suggests, in conclusion, that if critical theory is to regain its inspirational quality, it has to stop satisfying the dominant demand for 'practice' and it has to disentangle itself from the alignment with hegemonic historical forces. The core principles of critical theory – its refusal either to engage in problem-solving or to separate theory from history - already entail the resources to open up space for political imagination.

One further clarification should be made at the outset. The term critical theory is rarely defined in the current debate (Conway 2021). Since the first part of this article investigates claims made in IR, I will include there all the approaches that are generally recognized as critical in IR textbooks: Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and Habermasian approaches as well as generic reflections on critical theory. Meanwhile, the second part of the article introduces the original conceptualization of critical theory and traces its changing nature over time.

### **Critical theory in practice**

Has critical theory really proven to be the political failure many commentators assert? In order to investigate this claim, this section provides an empirical account of the performance of critical theory in IR from the 1980s onwards. It is guided by the two more specific claims we find in the current debate: that critical theory is out of sync with history, and that it is out of touch with practice. For reasons of space, I can only provide illustrative examples.

The claim that critical theory has been out of sync with history can have two meanings: one, that it fails to address historically relevant issues; and the other, that its own analytical concepts do not evolve in line with changing historical circumstances. Dividing the history of the international order since the 1980s into three broad phases – the second Cold War in the 1980s, the liberal world order during the 1990s, and its crisis and fragmentation in the 2000s – I will first investigate whether critical studies have addressed these historical developments.

The introduction of critical theories into IR coincides with the second Cold War in the 1980s – and hence with a (renewed) dominance of security issues in international affairs and with the realist construction of these issues as balance of power politics

between states. Though clearly inspired by theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences more generally (Ashley and Walker 1990: 263), critical IR scholars initially focused on the type of knowledge that made this very narrow conception of international relations possible: positivism, realism, security. Thus, Ashley shows how Waltz's positivist conception of theory limits the 'usefulness' of IR research to establishing control over an objectified reality rather than contributing to mutual understanding in international affairs (Ashley 1981: 217; Walker 1987). Similarly, Marxist authors had long argued that 'the interpenetrations of economic interests between states ... produces enormous and virtually insoluble theoretical problems' for the 'atomistic models' dominant in IR, thus requiring a critique of positivism (Thorndyke 1978: 89-90, 55; MacLean 1988: 295). To this end, they distinguished between a Marxist epistemology and 'method' on the one hand, and a Marxist theory of capitalism on the other (MacLean 1988: 309; Thorndyke 1978: 56) using the former to provide a critique of positivism in IR (Cox 1996: 85-97<sup>1</sup>). Habermasians, too, accused positivist realism of being unable to go beyond 'mere description and an account of current affairs' (Hoffmann 1987: 244-5, 231-2, 244-5; Linklater 1990: 10) and of the inability to account for cooperative outcomes in world politics (Müller 1994: 15). And when Cynthia Enloe asked 'where are the women?' she dramatized the fact that conventional IR scholarship managed to completely ignore half the world's population even while it aspired to 'objective' knowledge production (Enloe 1989: 8). Feminist scholarship thus, too, started out with a critical engagement with positivism (Peterson 1990) and moved on to a feminist reinterpretation of core realist texts (Tickner 1989).

With the end of the Cold War and the reemergence of a liberal world order, however, the unipolar shape of the international order and its hierarchical nature moved into the center of attention. Critical theories now turned to analyzing the liberal discourses underpinning these developments. Marxists questioned the discourse on globalization and interpreted the liberal world order as a (Gramscian) hegemony (Gill 1993: 3; Rupert 1995) or an 'empire of civil society' (Rosenberg 1994). Poststructuralists analyzed the biopolitical nature of global governance (Dillon and Reid 2001) while Habermasians saw 'unprecedented opportunities for overcoming

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Millennium* in 1981.

the moral deficits' of traditional nation states (Linklater 1998: 5; Müller 1994: 38). Feminists, meanwhile, investigated the political economy of gender in global governance (Whitworth 1994), and the disempowerment of women through development policies (Kabeer 1994) while postcolonial scholars, motivated by debates on the new imperialism began to make inroads into IR (Darby and Paolini 1994). They analyzed the hierarchical construction of North-South relations (Doty 1996), the role of culture and imperialism in European political and international thought (Jahn 2000; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004) and the discursive politics of 'rogue' and 'failed' states (Bilgin and Morton 2004).

By the end of the decade it became clear, however, that the liberal world order was not going to fulfill the promises of peace, prosperity, democracy and respect for human rights. The 2000s thus witnessed growing resistance to its principles (free trade), practices (interventions) and institutions (International Criminal Court) and a gradual demise and fragmentation of the liberal world order. In this context, critical theorists investigated the politics of terror (Reid 2005; Debrix and Barder 2009), the contradictions within liberalism (Jahn 2013), the return of geopolitics (Teschke 2006), border politics (Vaughan-Williams 2012), the role of religion in international relations (Pasha 2017) and the emergence of new political actors (Epstein 2008), new issues like precarity (Vij 2019) as well as resistance in general (Eschle and Maiguashca 2005).

In sum, ever since their introduction into the discipline of International Relations critical theories have been sensitive to historical developments and have provided analyses of the broadly shifting contours of the international order. What is more, I will now show, throughout this period each of these approaches has undergone significant theoretical developments well aligned with the historical context.

Marxist theories originally took the analysis of capitalism as their starting point and treated the proletariat as the 'privileged revolutionary subject' (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015: 282). Yet following the decline of the liberal world order, the fragmentation of the proletariat, the demise of traditional communist and even social democratic parties and the concomitant rise of a variety of social movements fuelled by concern with the environment or gender, sexual, racial and other inequalities,



Marxist scholars developed new theoretical approaches addressing this multiplicity. While political Marxists try to capture this diversity by turning to political agency and historical specificity (Knafo 2007), the theory of uneven and combined development posits multiplicity as a crucial underlying premise for theorizing social and political developments (Rosenberg 2016) and the privileged status of the proletariat is today widely replaced by intersectionality (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015: 282).

Feminist scholarship has undergone a similar development. Challenges by black and Third World feminists (Mohanty 1984) soon highlighted that 'woman' was not a universal concept paving the way for a strong poststructural strand in gender studies (Sylvester 1994). This focus on gender identities overlaps with and opened the way for Gay and Lesbian studies and, eventually, gender non-conformity and its implications in the case of queer theory (Weber 2016).

Postcolonial scholarship, too, has moved from the analysis of postcolonial discourses to the exploration of alternative epistemologies (Ling 2013; Shahi and Ascione 2016) as well as to race as a causal mechanism in its own right (Vitalis 2017; Anievas et al 2015). Most importantly, postcolonial scholarship now pursues the decolonization of 'our minds and our world politics' (Ling 2014: 582) and hence theorizes hybrid and ecumenical identities (Odysseos 2017). Poststructuralists, meanwhile, have begun to move beyond the traditional focus on ontological and epistemological issues to new methodological frontiers (Aradau and Huysmans 2014). Against the background of the simultaneous demise as well as reproduction of the 'liberal' world order, poststructuralists also theorize failure and its productive role in science and technology (Lisle 2018).

All strands of critical theory, in sum, have undergone considerable theoretical development over the course of their operation in IR. And far from representing some ahistorical theoretical flight of fancy, these developments clearly run parallel with and address contemporaneous historical dynamics. Critical theories, in short, are neither substantively nor theoretically out of sync with history.

Hence, I will now investigate the second claim, also in two parts: that critical theories have been politically irrelevant – because they failed to provide empirical studies of

pressing political problems. Have critical theorists 'empirically' analyzed 'pressing political problems'? To answer this question, I will treat as 'pressing political problems' issues that were widely discussed in mainstream academic and public debates and as 'empirical' analysis methods such as ethnographic fieldwork and interviews as well as the analysis of documents, pictures, statistics etc.

Critical IR scholarship systematically provides empirical analyses of pressing political problems from the 1980s onwards. In the context of the Second Cold War and the peace movement, feminists used fieldwork and empirical research to investigate strategic discourses (Cohn 1987) as well as the reproduction of gender inequality in and through military service (Yuval-Davis 1985). Among the most pressing political issues arising at the end of the Cold War were the Yugoslav wars. While feminists conducted interviews and used statistics to study the systematic use of rape in those wars (Stiglmayer 1994), poststructuralists analyzed their media representations (Campbell 1998). Marxists challenged dominant discourses on globalization by empirically comparing the integration of the world economy in the 1990s with that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hirst and Thompson 1996) while feminists exposed the gendered nature of global governance by studying policy documents of international organizations (Meyer and Prügl 1999). Feminist and postcolonial scholars also undertook fieldwork in Somalia (Miller and Moskos 1995) and analyzed international legal texts regarding the NATO intervention in Kosovo (Orford 1999).

In the early 2000s, 9/11 raised a host of important issues addressed by critical scholars. Thus, we find the empirical analysis of different cases of political self-sacrifice (Fierke 2012), a poststructuralist investigation of the Muhammad cartoon crisis (Hansen 2011), analysis of the role of enemy images in the case of Iraq (Dodge 2012), and legal implications of preemption in the war on terror (de Goede 2008). There are empirical investigations of counter-terrorism policies and programs like Prevent and Channel (Martin 2018) as well as of British involvement in prisoner abuse through the rendition program (Blakely and Raphael 2017). The analysis of media and policy documents demonstrates the role of gender in the justification of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the importance of women as targets and practitioners in counter-insurgency (Dyvik 2014). This development of a militarized

femininity is also explored through the role of women prisoners of war and women prison guards in the Iraq war (Sjoberg 2007).

In addition, critical scholars empirically investigated the AIDS crisis and its impact on security and governmentality (Elbe 2009). The financial crisis and rising inequality are widely explored through economic data (Knafo 2009; McNally 2010) and their political impact in the case of Brexit and Trump linked to electoral statistics (Rosenberg and Boyle 2019). Critical IR scholars have also provided in-depth empirical analyses of concrete human rights struggles and their consequences (Odysseos 2011) and of arms trade and licensing strategies (Stavrianakis 2008).

In short, critical scholars have systematically analyzed 'pressing political problems' and they have regularly done so using 'empirical' methods. It therefore now remains to determine whether this work has remained politically sterile. I will show that critical theories have made a significant contribution to different types of political impact.

I will begin with the impact of critical theories on their home ground: academia. Higher education in general and universities in particular, it is worth recalling, are integral to the division of labour in contemporary societies (Campbell and Bleiker 2016: 210). Since their entry into IR in the 1980s, critical theories have radically transformed the field. Today, IR textbooks regularly contain chapters on Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial – and sometimes even generically critical - theories (Baylis et al 2017; Sterling-Folker 2013). Proponents of these critical approaches now occupy chairs in IR (and Politics) departments (University of Sussex 2018). Critical scholarship like postcolonialism has led to the establishment of entirely new fields of study like Black Studies in the UK (Andrews 2016) and Africana Studies in the US (Cornell University). Critical scholarship is today published in mainstream journals - from *International Studies Quarterly* to the *European Journal of International Relations* – and it has its own outlets like *Security Dialogue* or *International Political Sociology*, the latter endorsed as an International Studies Association (ISA) publication. Professional IR associations have Global South, Women's and LGBTQA caucuses (ISA). Academics decolonize education, the classroom, the University (Kennedy 2017), ensure that women are represented on appointments committees, and rule out male-only panels at their conferences

(European International Studies Association, EISA). Even if mainstream approaches and positivism remain dominant in academia in general and IR in particular, therefore, critical theories have radically transformed the discipline's understanding of and approaches to the study of international relations (Rengger and Thirkell-White 2007: 5). And they have contributed to a shift in power relations as well as to organizational and cultural reform within academic institutions.

But the political impact of critical theories is not restricted to academia. Critical theories have played an important role in shifting public perception in a variety of issue areas thus empowering social movements. Marxist<sup>2</sup> and postcolonial studies, for instance, widely challenged the hegemonic discourse on globalization thus contributing to the anti-globalization movement, to protests against neoliberal economic and development policies (Krishna 2000: 155-6), to climate change negotiations (Saran 2015) as well as informing refugee and migration policies (Bilgic 2018).

Postcolonial analyses of the way in which representation and memory serve to uphold unequal power relations has informed protest movements for quite some time – from the naming of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton (Fisher 2015) through the 'Rhodes must fall' movement in Oxford and Cape Town to reviews of a number of public statues associated with colonialism, racism and genocide from Australia to New York (Mudditt 2017; NYT Editorial 2017). These movements are currently sweeping across the entire globe, leading to significant policy changes (The New York Times 2020). Similarly, poststructuralist work like Cynthia Weber's film *I am an American* (Weber 2007) is an integral part of public debate on the openDemocracy website while James DerDerian's documentaries have won awards at major film festivals and are the subject of national newspaper reports (Der Derian).

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<sup>2</sup> Marxism has long had considerable influence on political practice from communist political parties, through governments in Eastern Europe and the Third World throughout the 20th century, right up to the 'pink tide' in Latin America, peaking in 2011. Marxist scholars like Robert Cox worked for the ILO and became Director of its International Institute for Labour Studies before moving into academia (Holthaus and Steffek 2020).

Academic theories have also influenced political parties and topical issues like Brexit lately. The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, also influential in International Relations, played a role in the development of new parties like Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece (Judis 2016; Hancox 2015). Similarly, Marxist arguments feed into Lexit - leftist arguments for Brexit (McFadyen 2017; Zagoria 2017).

In addition, individual critical scholars actively participate in a wide range of political projects. Teivo Teivainen set up the Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD) and is an active member of the World Social Forum (Teivainen 2018). The scholar-activist network Transnational Institute has been supported by IR scholars like Fred Halliday, Boris Kagarlitsky, Richard Falk, Achin Vanaik (TNI). Poststructuralists are actively engaged in the 'Righting Corporate Wrongs' campaign (Coleman 2015; Coleman 2019).

Not limited to social and protest movements, critical theory has also shaped the policies of governments and international organizations. Postcolonial and feminist thought, for instance, is reflected in the Equality Act passed by the British Government in 2010 (Equality Act 2010) just as gender, LGBT and queer studies have paved the way for the integration of women into the military and the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policies in the American military in 2010. Similarly, feminist work<sup>3</sup> led to the recognition of rape as a war crime in the ICC (Rome Statute) and to the integration of policies addressing sexual and gender-based violence into humanitarian policies (Veit 2018). In 1995, the UN Human Development Programme adopted the Gender Development Index (GDI). It also led to the adoption of gender mainstreaming by the UN and NGOs and in 1996 the ILO adopted international standards for home based work that largely impacts on women (Tickner 2011: 273). Critical scholars serve as experts on governmental committees on human rights and arms trade (Stavrianakis 2015) and their work on the environment is taken up at the United Nations (UN) (Newell and Simms 2019; Newell 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Feminists, too, have a long history of practical political engagement with issues like peace and war (see, for example, Confortini 2012).

Critical theories have thus been successful in leading to legal and political change within and between societies. In doing so, however, they have also become part of the establishment. As Alex Veit shows, the integration of a response to sexual and gender based violence into humanitarian policies simultaneously entails an integration into a wider liberal governance strategy - thus providing opportunities for the improvement of beneficiaries' lives but not for the radical transformation of gender relations in society as a whole (Veit 2018). Similarly, the treatment of women is now used as a justification for war or intervention, in Afghanistan for instance, while International Financial Institutions use gay rights to cast their economic policies in a progressive light (Rao 2015). Critical thought is thus widely - albeit variably - reflected in public debate, in political struggles and in the law and policies of powerful states and institutions - where it now also serves dominant governance purposes. The same is true for academia itself. Erstwhile critical approaches like securitization theory become part of the academic establishment and begin to attract critical scrutiny (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020).

In sum, the empirical evidence shows that critical IR theories have, over the past (almost) 40 years, been closely aligned to historical developments and conducted empirical research into serious political issues. Above all, the empirical evidence undermines the claim that critical theories have had no political relevance. It shows, on the contrary, that critical theories have shaped a wide range of political principles, practices and institutions.

Yet, these empirical findings do not indicate that the debate about the fate of critical theory today is unfounded. Instead, they help us formulate the puzzle more accurately: How do we account for the widespread sense of disappointment amongst critical theorists in light of these achievements?

### **Critical Theory in theory**

In order to make sense of this tension, I will now trace the changing conception of critical theory over time and show that in the course of its inevitable engagement with political practice, critical theory loses sight of its core metatheoretical principles. Critical theories become integrated into the mainstream and thus lose the ability to

inspire visions of an alternative society. And it is this loss, not despite but because of the empirical successes of critical theory, that accounts for the current disappointment. What is more, I will show, the solutions offered to address this problem today tend to reflect the specific pressures of neoliberalism and lead to the subsumption of critical theory under the current hegemonic forces.

The term critical theory as used in professional academia today was originally coined by Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer's essay *Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie* (1937, republished in 1968) provides a useful starting point not only because it offers its first systematic conceptualization but also because it was motivated by the same question as the current debate. Confronted with the rise of Nazism, Horkheimer asked how it was possible that the sciences, supposedly based on reason, did not present an obstacle to the development of an utterly unreasonable society. What made the co-existence of science and national socialism possible? According to Horkheimer, the answer lay in certain features of 'traditional theory' and he designed 'critical theory' specifically to preclude such complicity. And yet, today it seems that critical theory has been unable to prevent the rise of populism. The current debate is therefore motivated by the parallel question: what makes the coexistence of critical theory and populism possible, and what resources does critical theory offer to confront this challenge?

Such parallels are, of course, dependent on drawing historical and theoretical lines – between the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s and populism today, and between Horkheimer's conception of critical theory and critical IR theories today. The historical claim of comparability is contested but it has given rise to a revival of interest in the Frankfurt School (Illing 2016; Ross 2016, Guyer 2020).<sup>4</sup> This interest is relevant for us in two ways. First, Horkheimer identifies core principles of critical theory that also explicitly characterized early conceptions of critical theory in IR - and it is these same principles that are fundamentally contested in the current debate. The fate of these principles over time thus provides a historical thread that

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<sup>4</sup> A more systematic exploration of the relationship between the Frankfurt School and IR, I will suggest below, has the potential to illuminate existing limitations of both – though it lies beyond the scope of this article.

meaningfully connects Horkheimer's work to the current debate. Second, Horkheimer theorizes the historical logic of critical theory and thus provides tools for its analysis today. Horkheimer's conception of critical theory, in short, serves as an analytical resource providing historical reference points and theoretical tools rather than authoritative definitions.

I will begin by reconstructing Horkheimer's conception and its difference to 'mainstream' theory. The next step shows that critical IR theories of all strands originally subscribed to the same core principles – that are now, however, under serious attack. Following Horkheimer's theorization of the historical dynamic of critical theory, the last section shows that it is the practical alignment with neoliberalism that engenders calls to discard these critical principles.

At the core of Horkheimer's conceptualization of critical theory lies the relationship between theory and practice – specifically, between science and national socialism. He argued that their coexistence was made possible by positivist theory in three main ways. First, positivism presupposes a separation between thinking and reality, reason and society. Ideally, theory serves to bridge this gap: to provide a theoretical explanation of that reality in the form of causal connections - hypotheses - which then need to be empirically tested (Horkheimer 1968: 16-7). Yet, this assumption overlooks, according to Horkheimer, that thinking itself is shaped by society and changes over time - hence that thinking and reality cannot be separated.

Second, positivism claims that its language is, in principle, universally valid, that it can be applied to all areas of knowledge. As long as one makes sure that all the individual elements of a particular theory are true (i.e. empirically substantiated) and logically connected, one can work one's way up from the simplest objects of cognition to the most complex ones (Horkheimer 1968: 13). Horkheimer points out, however, that if reason is indeed independent of reality - as positivism assumes - then positivist science is completely self-referential: it can only ever test its own theories rather than determine or explain extra-scientific purposes. Hence the inhumane purposes of Nazi society made no difference to the process of theorizing while, conversely, the scientific process never presented an obstacle to the development of national socialism (Horkheimer 1968: 18).



Finally, the purpose of positivist science is to make as much empirical knowledge as possible useful to society - rather like a library catalogue without which the accumulated books and articles cannot be accessed and used (Horkheimer 1968: 13). However, since positivist science cannot grasp society's purposes, it is useful only with reference to the existing purposes of society. The Nazis could make use of science despite, or indeed for, their inhumane purposes because the latter did not appear within the scientific process (Horkheimer 1968: 18).

Horkheimer therefore concludes that the positivist separation of reason and reality provided the basis for the coexistence of science and national socialism: by 'failing to fail', by allowing reason to exist within a fundamentally unjust and violent society, the sciences contributed to making the latter 'respectable'. And he locates this separation of reason and reality in a particular historical context. Liberal capitalist society, he argues, is not directed by a plan, governed by a particular authority, or oriented towards a common goal. Instead, the whole of liberal society emerges simply as the result of a myriad of particular relationships, as the result of competition between different individuals and groups (Horkheimer 1968: 22, 24-5). As long as the whole of society is unreasonable, therefore, reason cannot come into its own (Horkheimer 1968: 27-9, 36).

This analysis, whether or not it does justice to positivism, provides the basis for Horkheimer's elaboration of critical theory. The shortcomings of positivism imply that science has to overcome the separation of reason and reality if it wants to present an obstacle to violence and injustice. But this would require a transformation of society as a whole – whose unreasonable nature constitutes this separation. Alas, since society is constituted through a division of labour of which the sciences are an integral part, they cannot help but participate in its reproduction (Horkheimer 1968: 19). Any substantive vision of a better society is thus rooted in, the product of, and limited by the existing – unjust and violent – society. This analysis produces two basic assumptions: First, theory *is* practice. The sciences willy-nilly play a constitutive role in and for society, and hence there is no such thing as an 'ivory tower' - a sphere of knowledge production detached from political practice. Second, thinking, science, perception itself are socially formed: *all* knowledge is historical

(Horkheimer 1968: 23). Critical theory therefore has to operate under the same limitations as traditional theory: it has no privileged vantage point, no special methods, no access to the whole of society (Horkheimer 1968: 29).

Critical theory thus cannot offer a substantive notion of emancipation (Horkheimer 1968: 31). The emancipatory goal of transforming society as a whole must instead become a regulative ideal – and this in turn provides critical theory with two core principles. First, if a substantive notion of emancipation is only possible for society as a whole and if this whole is obscured to all parties, then the only way to honour that goal lies in the refusal to 'solve' particular problems within existing society, to make anything in that society work 'better'. Critical theory is suspicious of terms like 'productive', 'valuable', 'progressive' because they are defined with reference to the purposes of existing society - rather than its transformation. It thus lacks the 'pragmatic' character of, and cannot be 'consumed' like, traditional theory (Horkheimer 1968: 27, 29, 35-6). Second, critical theory honours the assumption that reason and society, knowledge and reality, theory and practice, are mutually constitutive by refusing to separate them in the scientific process. Critical theory therefore does not analyze problems 'out there'; it investigates those problems always through the way in which they are constituted through knowledge (Horkheimer 1968: 36). Critical theory aims to change thinking (Horkheimer 1968: 31); it reflects on the way in which knowledge production itself is complicit in the constitution of social and political issues.

But what does this mean for critical theory in practice – and for its relationship to practice? After all, critical theory cannot just rest on these metatheoretical principles; it has to apply them. And this means, first of all, that in the absence of a privileged vantage point with access to society as a whole (Horkheimer 1968: 29), it must – just like traditional theory - take particular individuals, groups or issues as a starting point. Second, in the absence of special methods, critical analyses must also use the most advanced theoretical tools available. Third, however, in order not to separate theory and practice, critical analysis has to focus reflexively on the particular forms of knowledge that constitute its object. And, finally, it must explore how the problem at hand is entangled with society as a whole (Horkheimer 1968: 35, 30).

In practice there is, then, considerable overlap between conventional and critical theory – from the focus on particular problems to the use of common methods. Indeed, Horkheimer's analysis of the limitations of 'traditional' theory were not at all unique. Max Weber's lecture on *Science as a Vocation* famously highlights the limits of scientific knowledge: establishing its historical nature, the particularity of its insights, its inability to grasp the whole or to establish objectivity (Weber 1948: 137, 135, 138, 139, 153). Weber, too, comes to the conclusion that 'science is meaningless because it gives no answer to ... the only question important for us: "What shall we do and how shall we live?"' (Weber 1948: 143). And like critical theory, Weber sees the highest aim of science in exploring 'the devil's ways to the end in order to realize his power and his limitations' (Weber 1948: 152). Mainstream and critical theories thus share a reflexive critique of science, just as they share conventional methods. Hence, the fact that critical theorists themselves use positivist methods – work on the 'authoritarian personality', for example, is based on hypothesis testing (Adorno 1973) - or that critical IR theorists use a wide range of empirical methods (as we have seen in the previous section) does not present a contradiction.

Rather, the difference between conventional and critical theory lies in the response to these limitations of science. For Weber, these limitations lead, at best, to self-clarification about the implications of the ends or means we choose, and thus to an ethic of responsibility (Weber 1948: 152). Meanwhile critical theorists aim to overcome these limitations – not by promising a substantive utopia but by keeping the possibility of an alternative open: through the refusal to become 'useful' within the given parameters.

Though critical IR theorists were inspired by a wide range of thinkers - from Horkheimer and the early Frankfurt School through Wittgenstein, Winch and Kuhn to Habermas and Cox as well as Foucault (George and Campbell 1990: 271-277, 282, 284) – they originally subscribed to the same two core principles derived from the same arguments. The historical and therefore particular nature of knowledge constitutes theory as 'always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox 1996: 87; Devetak 2013: 164; Campbell and Bleiker 2016: 198) - depriving the sciences of an Archimedean point from which to establish objectivity or grasp totality (George and

Campbell 1990: 270-1). In order to overcome these limitations, critical theory aims at 'the social and political complex as a whole rather than ... the separate parts' (Cox 1996: 89). But since this whole ultimately remains inaccessible, critical theory cannot offer an authoritative vision of a better society (Cox 1996: 97). In order to keep the possibility of a transformation of the entire society alive, therefore, critical theory refuses to engage in 'problem-solving' which is geared towards making the existing order function more smoothly (Cox 1996: 89). Instead, the aim of transcending the existing order in practice requires overcoming its limitations in theory: by reflecting 'upon the process of theorizing itself' (Cox 1996: 88; Hutchings 2007: 72; Rengger 2001: 105) - and by thus opening up thinking space (George and Campbell 1990: 269-70, 288; Ashley and Walker 1990: 259; Ashley 1981: 217).

Yet, Horkheimer and first generation critical IR theorists did not just share this critical stance towards calls for 'practical relevance' for theoretical reasons. Historically, such calls forced theorists to choose sides – between communists and capitalists in the 1920s and 1930s, between the Soviets and the Americans during the Cold War - and hence to sacrifice the critique of a society or an international system in which these were the only choices. Resisting demands for practical relevance was therefore the condition of the possibility to imagine an alternative society or international system; it played a key role in creating space for critical thinking and imagination beyond the given options. And yet, it is precisely such calls for practical relevance that drive much of the current debate – raising the question how and why such core principles are now fundamentally contested.

In order to answer this question, I will draw again on Horkheimer who offers explicit reflections on critical theory's historical dynamics. First, if critical theory cannot offer a substantive vision of a better society, it cannot offer any (authoritative) guidance for political practice (Horkheimer 1968: 31). Second, within a fragmented society in which material and ideological power serves to support privileges, all groups represent particular interests (Horkheimer 1968: 37-8). Hence, critical theory cannot identify particular individuals, groups, issues or causes as 'progressive' per se, as seeds of a future just society (Horkheimer 1968: 37-8). Today's oppressed can become tomorrow's oppressors. Hence, critical theory bears 'no flag' (Ashley and Walker 1990: 264).

But this does not mean that critical theory has no political impact. On the contrary, by undermining traditional ways of understanding particular issues, critical theories constitute them in new ways and thus pave the way for new practices. Critical (like any other) theories thus inevitably have political impact and therefore may also contribute to improvements for particular groups within society – as set out in the previous section. However, within a society that emerges from the competition between particular groups, the empowerment of some groups changes power relations within society but does not lead to the emancipation of society as a whole. Moreover, critical theories can never guarantee the political outcome of their particular activities because society as a whole emerges from the relations of all of its parts. It provides, as Foucault put it, nothing but a 'historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' (Foucault 1984: 50). This is why critical theories 'issue no promises' (Ashley and Walker 1990: 264).

Critical theory therefore contributes to historical developments even while it is itself subject to historical changes. It is motivated by different historical problems (Weber 2014: 533): the rise of fascism and national socialism for Gramsci and Horkheimer in the 1920s and 1930s (see Morton 2003: 121-2), the student revolution in 1968 for Foucault (Torring 2005: 5), the decline of the public sphere for Habermas in the 1970s, and the onset of the second Cold War in the 1980s which finally motivated IR scholars to import critical theory into the discipline (Ashley and Walker 1990: 265).<sup>5</sup> Critical theories are also shaped by their particular focus – racism, sexism, political violence, material inequality, subjectivity – developing the theoretical and methodological tools suited to their subject matter. As soon as critical *theory* is applied in practice, therefore, it fragments into critical *theories*.

This plurality of critical theories gives rise to significant differences and sometimes even to competition, for example between a focus on capitalism or patriarchy, or on everyday vs systemic reproductions of power (Hartmann 1979, Koddenbrock 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> Theory can and does, of course, also develop in response to theoretical developments, 'the spectre' of 'dissident theoretical attitude' in other disciplines (Ashley and Walker 1990: 263), for example.

But for the most part, this diversity of critical theories is the result of the application of core critical principles to different problems within society and historical periods. That is, most feminist, queer, Marxist, poststructuralist, postcolonial theories subscribe to the metatheoretical assumptions that theory is practice, that all knowledge is historical, and investigate the knowledge that constitutes their respective problems. Hence, feminist and queer theories *are* the updated and gender sensitive versions of critical theory just as decolonialism *is* the critical theory sensitive to colonial issues and poststructuralism *represents* a non-statist critical approach.

But this does not mean that critical theory cannot become uncritical. The fate of discourse ethics provides an instructive example. Jürgen Habermas was dissatisfied with the 'pessimistic' implications of critical theory and set out to rekindle its positive emancipatory element (George and Campbell 1990: 278-9). In order to support the argument that communicative action provided positive resources for a transformative practice, Habermas distinguished between the *system*, governed by the instrumental logic of money and power, on the one hand and the *lifeworld*, governed by the logic of understanding, on the other (Habermas 1984: 366-99; 1987: 106-130; Wyn Jones 2000: 8). Yet by separating communication from power (Hutchings 2005: 165), the lifeworld from the system (Schmid 2017: 7; Weber 2005: 203), the subject from the object (Fluck 2014: 57), emancipation from an analysis of existing injustices (Jahn 1998: 615, 622), democracy from capitalism (Azmanova 2020), discourse ethics identified a particular element of existing society as 'progressive' and ended up justifying the very power and interest from which vulnerable societies needed protection (Linklater 2005: 154). The tragic fate of Habermas' desire for practical relevance confirms the arguments of early critical theorists, within and outside of IR, and it illustrates how the relationship to practice leads to significant changes within critical theory itself.

We thus have to distinguish between two related dimensions (or levels) of critical theory: Its metatheoretical assumptions which are shared widely and are historically relatively stable since they are derived from the nature of liberal society as a whole; and its application in practice which gives rise to a plurality of particular critical theories that are constantly in flux, reflecting the changing relations between different groups and issue areas within society (Horkheimer 1968: 49, 50). What links these

two dimensions are the core principles of critical theory: to refrain from problem-solving and from separating theory and reality in the scientific process. And while the idea of emancipation is strictly tied to the metatheoretical level and the transformation of society as a whole, particular critical theories address specific issues within society and thus *inevitably* become entangled in its development .

These reflections help make sense of the curious frustration of critical theorists despite their political achievements – for the latter clearly belong into the second register of critical theories successfully addressing particular problems *within* society. This leads to the mainstreaming and institutionalization of various ‘critical’ projects and to the integration of critical theories into the academic establishment and public discourse. Yet the rise of populism highlights that these achievements do not amount to the transformation of society as a whole. Moreover, confronted with the rise of populism this very success puts critical theorists in a position of defending the status quo – which now embodies some of their achievements. Disappointment therefore arises from the fact that the particular achievements of critical theory appear to go hand in hand with the failure to transform society as a whole.

Yet, this perception of failure stands in contradiction to the original metatheoretical principles in which emancipation is neither derived from features of empirical reality nor does it entail any concrete empirical claims. Hence, critical theory does not promise emancipation – it simply posits that the transformation of society as whole may be possible. Yet, the validity of this assumption can only be determined with hindsight – once that transformation has occurred. In the meantime, there is no empirical evidence that can prove it right or wrong (Horkheimer 1968: 37, 39, 55). Brexit, Trump and the rise of populism do not prove that emancipation is not possible. At the metatheoretical level, critical theory is therefore ‘never “accurate” or “wrong”; it is only more or less illuminating, more or less provocative, more or less of an incitement to thought, imagination, desire, possibilities for renewal’ (Brown 2002: 574) – and this potential is realized by not representing things as they are, by undermining their familiarity, by providing different narratives, by refusing to be ‘useful’ and by focusing on the thinking that constitutes practice. While this theoretical practice can lead to empirical claims that require testing, it does not affect the metatheoretical assumption. But instead of applying these principles to the

current political juncture, critical theorists read recent political developments as empirical evidence for the failure of critical theory, as evidence for being *out* of sync with history and *out* of touch with practice. They have thus lost sight of the metatheoretical nature of the concept of emancipation and of the originally fundamental assumption that theory *is* practice and that *all* knowledge is historical. Moreover, in the attempt to get back into line with history and practice, they explicitly aim to discard the two practical principles that link the two levels of critical theory: the refusal to engage in problem-solving and the requirement to focus on the knowledge that constitutes practice.

In the last step of this analysis, I will locate this development of critical theory in its historical context and show that rather than being out of sync with history, the recent debate is perfectly in line with, and reflects the pressures of, neoliberalism. Historically, the introduction and development of critical theory in IR coincides almost exactly with the period of neoliberalism – and therefore with the extension of economic principles, of the market and competition, into all spheres of life. This development was amplified by the end of the Cold War that led to its globalization. It created a situation, in which it was ‘easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (Jameson 2003: 76) and Margaret Thatcher’s oft repeated claim that There is no Alternative (TINA) was widely experienced as a reality (Fisher 2009).

Moreover, this extension of market principles and competition included knowledge production and education (Brown 2005; Harvey 2007). Knowledge was now seen as a commodity and education as a driver of economic growth, development and global competitiveness. As Patrick’s research shows (2013), universities became producers of commercially exploitable knowledge: from intellectual property and patents to the training that turns student customers into high-skills, high-wage, marketable knowledge workers. Depending on the context, this process has taken a myriad of forms: from Ronald Reagan’s reduction of public funding for higher education in the US, through the redirection of such funds from universities to students in the UK, to the introduction of a competitive process for the funding of ‘excellence clusters’ in Germany. Despite vast differences in higher education systems, the common aim of



these policies is to introduce competition – which global university rankings ensure affects all of them.

It also affects the nature of knowledge: for even while knowledge becomes the most important commodity in the 'knowledge economy', all knowledge that is not readily commodified loses its value. 'Hence the intensifying demand on and in universities ... for knowledge that is applicable and marketable' (Brown 2002: 573) - including 'critical' theory which can provide institutions with a 'progressive' brand and helps to attract students.

This is the historical context in which critical IR theory successfully established itself, willy-nilly participating in the process of professionalization described above: contributing to textbooks, landing Chair appointments, founding critical journals, establishing professional networks, volunteering in professional organizations, validating critical work through prizes. Critical theorists have turned themselves into highly competent knowledge entrepreneurs and critical theory has become part of the academic establishment and is hence also subject to its pressures.

This context and its pressures are reflected in critical theory's latest developments. If there is no alternative to the existing globalized neoliberal world order, this undermines the rationale for a metatheoretical conception of the transformation of society as a whole – but it does provide a reason for shifting attention to particular issues within that society. The pressure to produce marketable knowledge directly undermines the critical requirement not to become useful – and provides strong incentives for 'critical problem-solving' (Post-Critical IR? 2018). In light of the demand for applicable knowledge, the critical requirement to focus on the knowledge that constitutes reality appears like a waste of time – and calls for a direct engagement with practice (Kurki 2011). And pervasive competition leads to the individualization not only of success but also of failure – and therefore to excessive self-criticism of critical scholars expressed in the current debate (Conway 2021).

Hence, if critical theorists today feel that their approaches lack the ability to provoke and inspire new ways of seeing things and acting in the world, it is not because they are out of touch with practice or out of sync with history. Quite the opposite. It is

because critical theorists are deeply embedded in the dynamic globalization of neoliberalism that they suffer from its closing down of alternative thinking spaces. And it is because critical theory participates in and is dependent on the dominant neoliberal practices of knowledge production that it experiences the pressure to be useful in and for existing society – and thus to abandon original critical principles.

## **Conclusion**

Critical theory is thus indeed in crisis, but its problems are widely misunderstood and the solutions run the risk of abandoning critical theory entirely – instead of reinvigorating it. Many critical theorists attribute their disappointment to a lack of engagement with practice and a disconnect from the current historical juncture. Yet, we have seen that critical theory has always engaged with concrete policies and was well aligned with historical developments. In fact, it can be proud of a wide range of political achievements. Critical theory is today firmly (though by no means irreversibly) embedded in universities and textbooks, in social movements and international organizations, in public debates and foreign policies.

And yet, it is the resultant close alignment with the historical forces of neoliberalism that has cost critical theory its inspirational quality. It subjects critical theory to the pervasive experience of TINA and thus challenges its core assumption that an alternative form of society is possible. And it is critical theory's active participation in neoliberal forms of knowledge production that dissolves its original suspicion of practical relevance and engenders calls to become 'more effective in its daily practice' (Post-Critical IR? 2018). The intimate entanglement with neoliberal history and practice thus simultaneously undermines critical theory's core aims and means: the emancipatory ideal of the possibility of an alternative form of society and the refusal to engage in problem-solving as the means to approach this aim.

But if the problem lies in the close entanglement with history and practice, the solution cannot lie in more of the same. On the contrary, such suggestions turn critical theory into an embodiment of neoliberal world views and practices. 'Updating' core critical principles, for example, subsumes theory under the dominant historical forces and sacrifices the space created by their tension – an end of history that literally removes the logical possibility of alternatives. Similarly, searching for an

authoritative version of critical theory extends the introduction of neoliberal competition into the realm of critical theories leading, just as in society at large, to fragmentation instead of the recognition of common predicaments and principles that could further creative cooperation. And the demand for acting in the world, requires instrumental rationality and catapults critical back into traditional theory (Rengger 2001: 102, 105) – as the fate of discourse ethics clearly demonstrates. If we capitulate ‘to the demand that theory reveal truth, deliver applications, or solve each of the problems it defines’ we sacrifice the very space for potential renewal that our inevitable alignment with the forces of neoliberalism has closed down (Brown 2002: 573-4).

Hence, if attachment is the problem, the solution lies in detachment: in creating spaces in which different forms of thinking become possible again. And this is precisely what critical theory’s core principles were originally designed to produce: by forcing the theorist to step away from the problem itself and focus on the knowledge that constitutes it instead, by refusing to solve problems directly and instead offering new ways of seeing these problems to a variety of creative political actors. We need, in short, to remind ourselves of the metatheoretical principles that critical theories share with each other, to apply them to our current predicament, and thereby to identify those pressures that need to be resisted and analyzed (Hutchings 2001: 88; 90; Paipais 2011; Levine 2012). And this, to be clear, is not an argument against practical political engagement – which critical theorists have always undertaken. It is an argument against confusing political practice with critical theory because the latter never promises a practical transformation of society as a whole. It promises to create the space for political imagination – a space that closes down when theory is made to fit practice.

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